

Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



September 2004

***The Roots and Implications of
East Asian Regionalism***

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***Occasional
Paper Series***

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE SEP 2004		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Roots and Implications of East Asian Regionalism				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2058 Maluhia Road, Honolulu, HI, 96815				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 16	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

The Roots and Implications of East Asian Regionalism

Regionalism in East Asia is driven by historical patterns of cooperation, the common challenge of the West, the century-long quest for an Asian identity, and growing economic interdependence and integration. Its progress is, however, likely to be slowed by Sino-Japanese rivalry, Southeast Asia's reluctance to fold itself into a larger East Asia, and public indifference. Moreover, few East Asians envision an exclusionary bloc that would leave out the United States, which remains a key economic partner and the ultimate guarantor of regional security. But even with American participation, East Asia's movement toward a grouping patterned after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or anything resembling the European Union (EU) community would be incremental at best.

Mapping Eastern Asia

Asia and its associated references—the East and Orient—were European inventions derived from the ancient Greeks. Originally, Asia referred to the land and people east of the Aegean, but it eventually encompassed the entire Eurasian landmass east of Europe's ill-defined borders. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, few Asians saw themselves as such or shared the European view of Asia as a distinct geographical entity. Even the Europeans recognized that this area was too large and diverse to comprise a single region. They consequently divided it into units that seemed to conform to its natural physical, cultural, and political divisions.¹ The Islamic zone of western Asia, dominated by the Ottoman and Persian empires, was one such unit which they called the Near (later Middle) East. Its geographical counterpart (the Far East) was divided into two distinct centers of higher culture or civilization: predominantly Hindu India ruled by the Islamic Mughal empire and Confucian China governed by the Ch'ing or Manchu dynasty. India and China, in turn, were flanked by smaller states that were influenced by them. Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, for example, were clearly cultural offshoots of Confucian China. Further south in what would eventually be called Southeast Asia, however, the picture was more complicated. Buddhism, originally an Indian religion, prevailed in Burma, Siam (Thailand), Laos, and Cambodia. Islam, imported from the Middle East via India, held sway in the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian archipelago while Christianity predominated in the Philippines, a Spanish colony since the sixteenth century. In part, because of these differences, Europeans described Southeast Asia as either a melting pot of Indian and Chinese influences (Indochina) or a cultural extension of India (Further India).

North of India and west of China lay the deserts and steppes of Central Asia, an area long known to Europeans as Tartary. The inhabitants of this sparsely populated zone were united by a common way of life based on nomadic pastoralism combined with oasis agriculture in some places. This sharply differentiated them from the sedentary agriculturalists of India, China, and Persia with whom they maintained close political and economic contacts. The western nomads were mainly Turkish-speaking Muslims, while those in the east along China's borders included Buddhists (Tibetans and Mongols), Muslims (Uighurs), and animists (Manchus).

The Europeans considered eastern Siberia as another component of the Far East. The *taiga* or dense forests of this vast area to the subarctic far north were the homeland of hunter-fishers such as the Yakuts and Tungus. Although these peoples had linguistic and other affinities with Koreans, Mongols, Japanese, and Manchus to the south, their mode of subsistence, tribal organization, and animistic religions seemed to link them more closely to the aboriginal inhabitants of northwestern North America.

The European Advance

European imperial expansion “simplified” the political map of the Far East by turning large parts of it into European colonies and dependencies.² This process began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the Spanish conquest of the Philippines, the imposition of the “indirect” Dutch rule over Java, and the advance of Russian settlers into eastern Siberia. The pace quickened after 1750 with the British takeover of the decaying Mughal Empire, eliminating independent India from the Far Eastern political equation and making the Indian subcontinent the jewel of Britain’s worldwide empire. Control of India gave the British the incentive and means (in the form of the British Indian Army) to expand their imperial activities eastward. During the nineteenth century, they conquered and annexed Burma to India and established their hegemony over the Islamic sultanates of the Malay Peninsula and northern Borneo. Their main objective, however, was to gain access to China’s supposedly limitless market. They accomplished this by defeating China in the 1839-42 Opium War, forcing the Manchus to open the country to trade on British terms.

Other European imperial powers followed Britain’s lead and were eventually joined by the Americans: The Dutch converted most of the Indonesian archipelago into the Netherlands East Indies; the French turned Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia into French Indochina; the United States replaced Spain as the colonial ruler of the Philippines; and the Russians absorbed western Central Asia (China had earlier annexed its eastern parts) and expanded their Siberian holdings by persuading China to transfer to them the trans-Amur area. With the exception of Siam, which survived as a buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina, only Japan, China, and Korea remained independent by 1900 though Japan subjugated Korea ten years later. Politically, the Far East was thus reduced to China and Japan, which not only preserved their independence but emerged as important players in the European-dominated international system. Imperial Japan’s continental expansion at the expense of the weak Chinese Republic—which threatened the Chinese interests of other imperialist powers—was the focus of Far Eastern international relations until the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941.

Reinventing the Far East

At the end of the Second World War, it was apparent—at least to the victorious Americans—that the term Far East was obsolete and would have to be replaced by a new construct more in tune with emerging post-war realities. Foremost among these realities was that the days of European colonial empires were numbered and that the empires would soon break up into a host of new Asian nation-states. Decolonization got underway in 1946 with America’s grant of independence to the Philippines. This was followed in quick succession by the emergence of India, Pakistan, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Indonesia, and North and South Korea (the 1948 division of Korea reflecting the intrusion of Cold War priorities). The imperial retreat continued in the 1950s and 1960s with the appearance of Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, and North and South Vietnam (both also Cold War creations). The political map of eastern Asia assumed—more or less—its contemporary form in the 1970s when East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan to form Bangladesh, and North Vietnam forcibly incorporated the South into a reunified Vietnam.

Well before the culmination of the decolonization process, a new regional paradigm established itself in academic, journalistic, and diplomatic discourse on Asia.³ The United States took the lead in formulating and popularizing this paradigm since World War II and the ensuing Cold War thrust global leadership responsibilities on it. Despite earlier imperialist ventures, most Americans looked askance at European colonial empires and subscribed to the idea of national self-determination. The new world of emerging Asian nations required, in their view, a new geography free of colonial and Eurocentric biases and an objective understanding of non-Western people. Social scientists, particularly anthropologists, based this new geography on the “culture area” concept—the idea that otherwise diverse people are linked by fundamentally similar values, beliefs, and practices. Armed with this concept, they set about remapping the world in the 1940s and 1950s.

In the case of Asia, the new regional scheme was in some ways a repackaging of the old, just purged of its Eurocentric terminology and assumptions. The Near or Middle East, for example, was renamed West Asia, but it largely retained its former geographic boundaries and Islamic cultural referent. The Far East was abandoned as a general descriptor of eastern Asia and divided into four new regions: Central Asia (also known as Inner Asia), South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. East Asia, which encompasses China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, was the least problematical since it coincided with what had long been recognized as the Confucian or Sinic civilizational area. (The extent to which Confucianism survived in these societies was, however, debatable.) South Asia, which includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, also meshed with the older notion of a Hindu-based Indian civilization. It was, however, a more questionable construct since the subcontinent contained Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions. This quandry was smoothed over by assuming an underlying Indic cultural matrix.

The identification of Southeast Asia as a stand-alone world region comparable to East, South, and Central Asia was the most surprising and controversial feature of the new geography. Prior to the Second World War, only a few German anthropologists had discerned any cultural unity in this area or even used the term Southeast Asia to describe it. Postwar American area-specialists hailed them as pioneers in the discovery of Southeast Asia as a coherent region and its rescue from a long-held belief that it served as mere crossroads or an appendage of Chinese and Indian civilizations. But demonstrating Southeast Asia’s cultural unity in the face of its obvious diversity was no easy task, and many skeptics doubted that it qualified as a region based on the culture area concept. Nevertheless, regionalists prevailed. They did so in part because the wartime creation of the South East Asia Command (SEAC) and focus on the area during the Cold War rivalry had popularized the idea that it constituted a region, albeit one with only shadowy unity and indistinct borders. The triumph of the regional concept can also be attributed to Southeast Asian leaders who found it a useful ideological prop to limit interference in their affairs. The formation of ASEAN in 1967 launched this project and gave irresistible momentum to the acceptance of Southeast Asia as a world region.⁴

East Asia Redefined

The end of the Cold War brought the culture area concept under critical scrutiny from a variety of angles.⁵ The demise of the Soviet Union revealed that the supposedly objective criteria used to define these regions instead reflected Cold War priorities and divisions, such as the separation of eastern and western Europe. Globalization—the accelerating flow of goods, people, and ideas made possible by modern technology—suggested that the culture area concept was too static and one-dimensional and ought to be replaced by a model of regions that took into account economic, social, and political interactions. New ideologies and intellectual fashions added to the ferment. Constructivists argued that regions were essentially mental constructs that could be invented and sold by elites regardless of objective conditions. A new breed of

regionalists, inspired by the EU example, championed regional cooperation and identity building as the wave of the future to form supranational communities as well as end national rivalries and conflicts.

These diverse viewpoints did not lead to the abandonment of the ideas of South, Southeast, and East Asia, which continued to enjoy wide acceptance. The new thinking did, however, enhance the popularity of several novel regional constructs. One of these was the Asia-Pacific region comprising Northeast and Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Russian Far East, and the littoral states of North and South America including the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Another construct was a larger East Asia region including Southeast and Northeast Asia. Neither of these constructs made much sense in the cultural arena, although proponents of the larger East Asia idea argued the existence of common Asian values linking Southeast and Northeast Asians.

Behind the emergence of the Asia-Pacific and new East Asia regions lay seismic shifts in Asian economic and political relationships. Early Cold War eastern Asia—from the late 1940s to the early 1970s—was in general inhospitable to the growth of regional cooperation. The Cold War divided the area into antagonistic communist and anticommunist alliance systems centered on the Soviet Union and United States. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-style collective security arrangements were attempted by the United States in the form of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), but proved disappointing. Although nonalignment provided an ideological basis for cooperation outside these blocs, it was undercut by national conflicts such as those between India-Pakistan and Indonesia-Malaysia. The 1966 emergence in Indonesia of the Suharto regime, which was more inclined to cooperate with its neighbors than its predecessor, paved the way for establishment of ASEAN in the following year. But ASEAN remained at odds with communist Vietnam and Mao's China, which supported communist insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia. The economic integration of Southeast and Northeast Asia around Japan began in this period with Japanese war reparation payments and modest investments in South Korea and Southeast Asia. However, Japan was oriented mainly toward its U.S. ally and largely cut off from China, its most important prewar economic partner.

This situation altered dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. A key catalyst for change was the 1971-72 Sino-American rapprochement, which effectively ended the Cold War as far as the United States and China were concerned and led to the normalization of China's relations with Japan, ASEAN, and eventually South Korea. The amelioration of Cold War tensions set the stage for the refocusing of national energies and priorities on economic development. Japan offered the model for this in the form of its phenomenally successful, state-guided, export-led industrialization. South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore led the way in emulating this model with Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and (after 1979) China eventually jumping on the bandwagon. Although Japan provided large inputs of aid and private investment, the United States was a major investor as well as a vital market for nascent Asian export industries. Even before the Cold War wound down in 1989-91, it was apparent that Southeast and Northeast Asia were economically tied to each other and the United States in ways that had no historical precedent. Given this situation and the demonstration effect of ventures in regionalism elsewhere, some form of regional cooperation seemed necessary.

East Asian vs. Pacific Regionalism

The main question, then and now, is whether regional cooperation should be organized on a pan-Pacific or East Asian basis, or some combination of the two. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir—alarmed by the establishment of the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) which seemed to portend a new era

of exclusionary blocs—proposed in 1990 the formation of the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) which excluded the United States and other extra-regional powers. The EAEG concept played to East Asians' newfound sense of interdependence and pride in their economic accomplishments. There was, however, little enthusiasm among other Asian countries for excluding the United States from the East Asian economic equation—the American market was too important. Besides, a United States that had a diminished economic stake in East Asia might disengage politically, dismantling its alliance system and withdrawing its forward deployed forces, which were (in the final analysis) the only reliable guarantee of regional stability. In any event, East Asians pursued pan-Pacific regionalism while keeping alive the East Asian option. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) was set up in 1989 to promote economic cooperation among the Asia-Pacific states. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) followed in 1994 to enhance political and security cooperation among these states plus India and the EU.

The 1997-98 Asian financial crisis dealt a setback to advocates of pan-Pacific regionalism.⁶ APEC proved ineffective in dealing with the crisis. Moreover, the remedies prescribed by the U.S.-backed International Monetary Fund (IMF) seemed to many East Asians to unnecessarily prolong and aggravate the economic dislocation. The idea of creating an institutional mechanism to promote East Asian cooperation consequently made a comeback. Mahathir's EAEG proposal was still too extreme for most since it smacked of bloc building, but some sort of intergovernmental coordinating body seemed essential. The result was the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process, which brought together ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea in a common effort to work out currency swaps and other arrangements designed to forestall another economic meltdown and dilute the influence of the IMF.⁷ APT was, however, more than just currency swaps. Its boosters, notably South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, spoke optimistically of its possible evolution into something resembling ASEAN. The APT "vision group" charted an ambitious plan of cooperative projects and forecast the emergence of an East Asian community. China and Malaysia also championed APT but as a vehicle for curtailing U.S. influence in East Asia.

Other developments reinforced the impression that East Asia was coming together. China, which had earlier regarded regional initiatives with skepticism, embraced APT and became an active participant in both ARF and APEC. In the context of its courtship of ASEAN, Beijing displayed a new willingness to enter into cooperative undertakings by, for example, signing a code of conduct in the disputed South China Sea and negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with ASEAN. China's drive to forge closer ties with Southeast Asia was also evident in its joint projects with Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.⁸ But China's newfound enthusiasm for East Asian regionalism did not carry over into its relations with Japan, which soured in the late 1990s largely as a result of Beijing's disposition to view the Japanese as regional rivals. Meanwhile, Japan's eagerness to lead East Asia's integration had diminished. Having counted on China's goodwill and the cooperation of a strong and united ASEAN, the Japanese found that neither of these conditions existed after the financial crisis.⁹ Despite its protracted recession, Japan remained a major player by virtue of its economic weight and the unwillingness of Japanese elites to concede the field of regionalism to a "rising China."

The New Asianism

East Asian regionalism received a boost from the growing vogue in the 1990s of Asianism—the idea that Southeast and Northeast Asians are united by common values rooted in shared Asian cultural traditions that differentiate them from Westerners. This idea was anathema to many area specialists who viewed Southeast and Northeast Asia as distinct cultural areas. It also ran afoul of those who saw Asianism as an

attempt to cut East Asia from its Asia-Pacific moorings and repudiate universal human rights and democratic values. There was some substance to the latter charge. Leaders of the Asianist movement—such as Malaysia’s Mahathir and Singapore’s elder statesman Lee Kwan Yew—were not enamored of Western popular culture and liberal democracy and, instead, intent on constructing alternatives. They found the material for these alternatives in supposed Asian Values such as respect for authority, hard work, social harmony, and the primacy of the group over the individual, which contrasted sharply with perceived Western hedonism, egoism, and contentiousness.¹⁰

Critics found it easy to poke holes in Asian Values.¹¹ Some pointed to the implausibility of dichotomizing Asia and the West, arguing that both are culturally too diverse and intertwined to make such a crude division meaningful. Others zeroed in on the vagueness of the term Asia (even Asianists defined it in many ways) and the elusiveness of the cultural referent to putative common values. Even if there was some substance to the notion of shared Confucian Values linking China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Singapore—a notion not universally accepted¹²—it was a stretch to equate these with the Islamic values of the Malay world and the Buddhist values of mainland Southeast Asia. To many critics, Asian Values seemed to be largely imaginary and defined as the antithesis of an equally imaginary Western “Other.” Still, Asian Values retained considerable appeal as did the concept of an Asian Mind—the idea that Asians think in more holistic and relativistic terms than Westerners. The plausibility of the Asian Values and Asian Mind constructs was enhanced by some social science research, including a recent study by a prominent American social psychologist who drew on laboratory testing of East Asians (defined as Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese) and Euro-Americans in an attempt to validate the Asian Mind idea.¹³

Why were Asians, particularly East Asians, attracted to a non-Western and potentially anti-Western identity? To be sure, Asian Values served to rationalize Mahathir and Lee’s semi-authoritarian styles of governance and their need for an ideology to unify ethnically and culturally diverse societies. But the appeal of Asian Values went well beyond Malaysia and Singapore: Japanese, Indonesians, Koreans, Chinese, and others were also drawn to them. Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani identified one source of this appeal by calling attention to East Asia’s “explosion of confidence” borne of its dynamic economic growth and apparent success in synthesizing Western and Asian ways.¹⁴ The flip side of this confidence was East Asian resentment against perceived Western arrogance and condescension. Post-Cold War Western “triumphalism” inflamed this resentment. For example, the claim by End of History enthusiasts that Western-style liberal democracy and free-market capitalism were now destined to sweep all previous forms of government galled some Asians who viewed the success of their societies as the result of different factors. Nationalists and Asianists consequently joined forces, the most notable example being Mahathir and Shintaro Ishihara, Japan’s most popular neo-nationalist who coauthored a 1995 best seller revealingly entitled (in Japanese) *An Asia that Can Say No: A Policy to Combat Europe and America*.

Many Western observers were relieved when the 1997-98 financial crisis took the wind out of Asianists’ sails by exposing unexpected weaknesses in what the World Bank had proclaimed only a few years earlier to be the East Asian economic miracle.¹⁵ In addition, Japan’s once-vaunted economic system, the model of this miracle, was mired in recession and seemingly on the brink of a banking collapse. It consequently became fashionable to write off Asianism as a temporary phenomenon that would soon fade. But this obituary was premature. In fact, widespread East Asian unhappiness with IMF-prescribed reforms (which some saw as Western “ganging up” and another manifestation of Western triumphalism) breathed new life into East Asian regionalism in the form of APT. The parallel quest for an East Asian identity spearheaded by the Asian Values movement also continued, this time without the earlier high-profile Western media attention.

The Old Asianism

One reason Asianism survived the financial crisis is because of its historical roots, which were deeper than some believed. Rather than being a new phenomenon of the 1990s, it was in fact a revival of a movement that had exerted strong appeal on Asian intellectuals and political leaders from the 1890s through World War II.¹⁶ Asianism thereafter went into eclipse until the 1980s and 1990s. As noted, the early Cold War period was hostile to regionalism. Moreover, prewar Asianism was tainted in the eyes of many when Japanese militarists appropriated the ideology to justify their attempt to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in the early 1940s. Not surprisingly, the new Asianists of the 1990s were not eager to play up their affinities with their predecessors. Nevertheless, there is much overlap in their basic themes and preoccupations. These continuities suggest that, far from being a fad, Asianism is a durable feature of the East Asian scene that is unlikely to go away any time soon.

Prewar pan-Asianism (as it might be called to differentiate it from its contemporary successor) was mainly concerned with the challenges posed by Western imperialism and colonialism. Early pan-Asianists, such as the Western-trained Japanese art historian Tenshin Okakura, were distressed by what they saw as the West's economic and political victimization of Asia. But they were especially outraged by the tendency of many Westerners to regard their own civilization as the only one worthy of the name, and to deride those of Asia as backward, stagnant, and quaint. For pan-Asianists like Okakura and their Western Orientophile allies and mentors, combating Western cultural chauvinism required constructing an Asian cultural identity that was equal or superior to that of the West in which all Asians could take pride. They found this in the Ideals of the East—spirituality, intuitionism, and communitarianism—which they contrasted favorably with the West's materialism, rationalism, and individualism.¹⁷

Asian intellectuals and nationalists as diverse as India's Rabindrath Tagore and China's Sun Yat-sen were attracted to the Ideals of the East construct.¹⁸ But selling the idea of one Asia was not easy in the face of fundamental differences among Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Confucian heritages. Pan-Asianists got around this difficulty in several ways. Some discerned common philosophical and aesthetic tendencies; Okakura, for example, cited a unifying "love for the Ultimate and Universal." Others emphasized presumed affinities among the "colored races" of Asia, which differentiated them from Euro-American "whites." (The attribution of behavioral characteristics to races was part of the early twentieth century conventional wisdom.) Still other pan-Asianists pointed to basic cultural commonalities among Asians such as their closeness to nature and esteem of group values, which they attributed to geographical factors (e.g., Asia's monsoonal climate) and similar socioeconomic patterns (e.g., intensive agriculture practiced by masses of peasant farmers densely packed into river valleys and deltas).

Pan-Asianism and its contemporary successor are vulnerable to the criticism that they assume a false dichotomy between Asia and the West while they exaggerate their homogeneity. Even as pan-Asianists were formulating their ideas in the 1890s and early 1900s, it was obvious to well-informed observers—Asian as well as European—that both Asia and the West were quite diverse and steadily becoming more alike. But it was precisely Asia's westernization that troubled pan-Asianists, since it seemed to imply that Asians would lose their dignity and identity by becoming second-class Westerners. This concern was widely shared and had some merit. One thinks, for example, of discriminatory American immigration legislation against Asians; the refusal of victorious Western powers in World War I to include a racial equality clause in the League of Nations charter; and the daily humiliations of Western colonial rule depicted in E. M. Forster's 1924 classic, *A Passage to India*. Behind these slights, real and imagined, lay

the widespread gulf in thought and feeling between Asians and Westerners which was neatly captured in Kipling's famous aphorism that "East is East and West is West, and never shall the twain meet."

European colonialism and imperialism are long gone, but the pan-Asianist search for an Asian identity continues, albeit now focused mainly on East Asia. This continuity is most evident in formulations like Asian Values and Asian Renaissance (the title of an influential 1997 book by Malaysian Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim), which are essentially updated versions of earlier pan-Asianist ideas. To be sure, not all contemporary Asianists subscribe to the notion that Asian and Western values are antithetical. Anwar, for example, argued that they are complementary.¹⁹ Nor do they agree that East Asia is rediscovering its onetime civilizational unity. Japanese journalist Yoichi Funabashi popularized the phrase Asianization of Asia in 1993 to highlight the creation of a new Asian identity, not the recovery of an old one.²⁰ Indeed, for modernists like Funabashi, East Asia has no historical unity or identity, a position that puts them at odds with prewar pan-Asianism as well as other contemporary Asianists. Their grounds for taking this view is that premodern East Asia did not evolve a unitary civilization comparable to that of medieval Western Europe with its common religion (Catholic Christianity), written language (Latin), ideal of political unity (the Holy Roman Empire), and similar art, architecture, literature, and philosophy.

East Asia's Historical Unity

Measured against Western European Latin Christendom, premodern East Asia—the way that East Asia was configured prior to the mid-nineteenth century European invasion—does not qualify as a historical region.²¹ It lacked, for example, a unifying belief system, the most fundamental attribute of such a region. Buddhism was the closest approximation, but its Northeast and Southeast Asian variants—Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism—were as different as Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. (Its Central Asian form, Lamaism, was distinct from both.) Moreover, Buddhism was eclipsed by Confucianism in Northeast Asia and by Islam in the Malay world of Southeast Asia. There is, of course, a danger of exaggerating these religious fault lines and overlooking their syncretistic tendencies, such as those between Buddhism and Confucianism. Still, the differences among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islamism were real enough to contemporaries and, to some extent, persist today as divisive factors.

It has long been recognized that geographical barriers—mountains, deserts, and oceans—isolated East Asia from the rest of Asia. But this isolation was relative, and its significance is open to question. It undoubtedly contributed to the self-contained and inward-looking character of China's civilization as well as its impressive continuity. Imperial China was often threatened and sometimes overrun by nomadic invaders from Central Asia. But institutional breakdowns and periods of disunity were temporary; the Chinese state and society were always reconstituted under new dynastic management, even if these dynasties were non-Chinese as in the case of the Manchus. Southeast Asia was less isolated and more open to outside influences. From earliest times, it was subject to repeated waves of Indianization—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islamism—borne across the Indian Ocean by traders and missionaries. Still, Southeast Asians never became "Indians." Their cultural borrowing from South and West Asia was controlled and tailored to meet local needs and biases. (The Indian caste system, for example, was never widely adopted.) Moreover, Southeast Asians' most important political, social, and economic interactions were not with India but with China.

Older textbooks sometimes referred to Southeast and Northeast Asia as the domain of Mongoloid man, meaning that most of their inhabitants shared physical traits that differentiated them from other major

racess of mankind.²² Such classifications have fallen into disfavor, in part because racial characteristics like skin color, eye shape, and hair texture are now regarded as too variable and superficial to serve as a meaningful basis for differentiating human populations. Anthropologists, particularly those concerned with the prehistoric peopling of eastern Asia, continue to employ the concept of a Mongoloid physical type. Even if one grants some utility to this concept, one should be wary of assuming that premodern East Asians invested racial differences with the same meaning as their modern counterparts, or that these differences correlate with behavior or culture. In terms of language, for example, East Asia was—and still is—exceedingly diverse. Linguists recognize no less than five separate language families: Altaic (including Mongolian, Korean, and Japanese); Sino-Tibetan (Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese); Tai (Thai, Lao); Austroasiatic (Vietnamese, Cambodian); and Austronesian (Indonesian, Filipino).

Common socioeconomic patterns provide a somewhat firmer basis for postulating a degree of unity to premodern East Asia. The most important of these was the prevalence of irrigated rice agriculture across much of it, including Japan, Korea, China south of the Yangtze, and Southeast Asia. This form of agriculture was labor-intensive and highly productive, leading to the development of dense concentrations of small-scale farmers in river valleys and other favorable growing areas. (The fertile North China plain—the cradle of Chinese civilization—witnessed the same development but was based on crops like millet that were more suited than rice to the relatively harsh climate.) The fulcrum of East Asian agrarian societies was the self-sufficient village community, which was composed of peasant families linked by kinship and the requirements of the agricultural cycle. Although these communities were not necessarily homogenous or harmonious, the imperative of cooperation promoted the celebration of communal values such as teamwork, consensus, mutual assistance, and respect for the authority of elders and other community leaders.

Following the arguments of the proponents of Asian Values, one might assume the spontaneous carry-over of these values into contemporary East Asian societies. But caution is in order. There is no lack of evidence to suggest that traditional values have been deliberately recreated and reprogrammed by modern elites to serve purposes of social and political control. Moreover, there is nothing specifically Asian or even non-Western about communal values. They are common to most peasant societies and preindustrial people in general. So, too, are other similarities between premodern Southeast and Northeast Asia, such as the worship of nature and ancestral spirits, the social and political dominance of hereditary aristocracies, and the disposition to invest kings with divine attributes. What is perhaps unusual about East Asia was China's bureaucratic monarchy run by *mandarins* or scholar-officials selected on meritocratic principles and Japan's feudal system—rule by semi-autonomous lords and *samurai*, their military retainers—which existed nowhere else in Asia although they had parallels in medieval Europe.

China at the Center

East Asia was never politically unified into a single entity comparable to the Ottoman or Mughal empires except perhaps during the Mongol ascendancy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and then only partially. Nevertheless, important economic, political, and social interactions developed within East Asia. These interactions centered on Imperial China, which—until the mid-nineteenth century—was the wealthiest, most powerful, and (in the view of many) most culturally and technologically advanced state in the region.

The Chinese viewed themselves not only as the regional superpower but also as the center of the world. From their perspective, there were good grounds for this self-image. From earliest times, they never faced a civilizational rival or peer competitor. Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Caliphates, the Ottomans, and

Mughals were too distant to matter much to the Chinese. Reality to them was the world near at hand, which was composed of barbarians—some dangerous, others harmless, but all uncivilized in Chinese terms. Unlike other people with a similar worldview such as the Romans, the Chinese were not attracted to military conquest or a civilizing mission. With the exception of occasional forays into Central Asia and the early fifteenth century Ming voyages into the Indian Ocean, the Chinese thought in defensive terms. It was enough to secure the borders of their empire, which for most of Chinese history coincided with those of China proper, the homeland of the Han or ethnic Chinese. As long as the barbarians beyond maintained a deferential posture or kept to themselves, the Chinese were inclined to leave them to their own devices.

The nomads of Central Asia posed Imperial China's most serious foreign policy problem. Despite the Great Wall, they could not be kept at bay, and their mobility gave them decisive advantages over Chinese peasant armies. But while the nomads might be able to conquer China, they could not maintain their pastoral lifestyle there, and their small number made them vulnerable to assimilation. To govern China, moreover, they had no choice but to adopt Chinese institutions and ways, which pushed them toward "becoming Chinese." By the same token, however, the nomads were immune to Sinicization in their steppe homeland, which was unsuited to Chinese-style intensive agriculture. The result was a permanent standoff between "steppe and sown." This gulf was in some ways bridged. Close trade and political ties developed, and hybrid Sino-nomad societies emerged in frontier areas such as Manchuria. In the eighteenth century, the Manchus ended the nomad threat by conquering and annexing Tibet, Sinkiang, and Mongolia and turning them into closely supervised vassal states. But this did not eliminate the nomad problem, since few Tibetans, Uighurs, or Mongols welcomed Chinese rule or saw themselves as Chinese.²³

Conquest and annexation were neither practical nor desirable options for Imperial China in Southeast Asia. The Chinese saw no threat from this quarter and were disinclined to assume the burdens of pacifying its culturally alien and fiercely independent people. (An exception was China's thousand-year occupation of Vietnam, which the Chinese considered to be ethnically and culturally close to them, but this occupation failed to make the Vietnamese "Chinese" or reconcile them to Chinese rule.) Beijing's top priority was the security of its southern border provinces, which required keeping the neighboring kingdoms of Burma, Siam, and Vietnam compliant. This was accomplished through the tributary system under which their kings accepted the nominal suzerainty of China's emperor and undertook to respect his wishes.²⁴ Tributary status involved no loss of independence for these rulers. China rarely interfered in their affairs, and its attempts to do so were repulsed with military force. Moreover, this status conferred important benefits on them including trading privileges and the prestige of recognition by China's "Son of Heaven." There was no counterpart to the Chinese tributary system in Southeast Asia's relations with India; indeed, its political contacts with Indian and Middle Eastern states hardly existed. Nor was there any South Asian parallel to the Chinese diaspora that implanted enclaves of ethnic Chinese traders throughout Southeast Asia. As important as the Indian Ocean trade was to Southeast Asians, the South China Sea "junk trade" and overland commerce between southern China and mainland Southeast Asia outweighed it.²⁵

Trade was no less important in knitting together China and its eastern neighbors, Korea and Japan. But here the picture was complicated by political factors that did not operate in Southeast Asia. Feudal Japan was the sole nonnomadic state on China's periphery that refused to accept tributary status and posed a potential military threat, as was underscored by its attempt to invade China through Korea in the 1590s. The Chinese and Koreans viewed the Japanese samurai as dangerous semicivilized barbarians and shared an interest in containing them on their offshore islands. (For reasons of their own, the Japanese obliged by retreating into national seclusion in the 1630s.) Beijing looked upon Korea as a strategic buffer state and

the Koreans, for their part, welcomed China's protection and prided themselves on being East Asia's "star pupils" of its Confucian civilization. As much as the Japanese resented China's pretensions to overlordship, they regarded it as a cultural model and enthusiastically imported its art, literature, and philosophy. In the absence of official tributary relations, Sino-Japanese contacts were conducted through Korea (which permitted indirect trade with Japan) and the nominally independent but Japanese-controlled Okinawa. Though Japan was a political outlier in the Sinic world, it was nonetheless economically and culturally integrated in it.²⁶

The Relevance of History

What does this long-vanished Sinocentric order have to do with contemporary East Asia? Some elements of it survive more or less unchanged (e.g., language and ethnicity). Others persist in altered form to serve modern purposes (e.g., traditional monarchies and ideas about state boundaries). Still others linger as the foundation of contemporary mytho-histories about collective national experiences.²⁷ Perhaps the most important of these mytho-histories is the notion of China as East Asia's once and future hegemon, presiding benignly over its family of subordinate people. There is some historical substance to this image, including Imperial China's generally noninterventionist posture and the peaceful character of Chinese commercial expansion. But China's neighbors have different historical memories. The Vietnamese, for example, record their interaction with China as a heroic struggle to preserve their independence against Chinese designs to "recolonize" them. As much as the Japanese imagine China to have been their Greece and Rome, not a few take pride in the fact that they alone refused to kowtow to its emperor, and that one of the monumental figures in their national history—Toyotomi Hideyoshi—made his mark on world history by trying to conquer China.

The century of European imperialist domination from the 1840s to the 1940s also left a mixed legacy for contemporary East Asian regionalism. European colonialists and their Japanese and American emulators divided the region into separate colonial spheres each of which was oriented politically, economically, and culturally to a different mother country. There were, however, commonalities to the colonial experience beyond simply the shared humiliation of alien rule. As different as they were in other respects, colonial regimes were alike in drawing precise territorial borders, promoting similar plantation economies, imposing centralized administrations, and undertaking infrastructure development projects. Whether or not colonial people benefited from these innovations, they were drawn together into wider forms of association and imbued with new wants and expectations. Colonialism sowed the seeds of its own destruction by creating discontented masses and alienated elites who were inspired by the nationalist ideals their European masters preached at home but did not tolerate in the colonies. By joining European colonialism just when it was going on the defensive against rising Asian nationalism, the Japanese put themselves on the wrong side of history and paid the price by earning the seemingly undying resentment of Chinese and Koreans who were the focus of their empire-building efforts.

At first glance, the Cold War was hardly a unifying event in East Asia, and its baleful legacy lives on in the continuing division of China and Korea. Looked at more closely, however, the Cold War had other, more positive consequences for contemporary regionalism. The desire of Southeast Asians to become more than pawns on the Cold War chessboard, for example, contributed to the formation of ASEAN, the first and still the most successful venture in regionalism. The American hub-and-spoke alliance system is often held to have inhibited the growth of regionalism.²⁸ But it kept the sea-lanes open, pumped American aid into noncommunist East Asia, and integrated it into Free World trading and financial networks. It also stimulated the rise of Japan as an economic superpower and integrator of Southeast and Northeast Asia.

Except in the case of Indochina, it kept the peace, holding bitter rivals apart and mitigating historic animosities (e.g., those between Japan and South Korea). The best testimony to the value of the U.S. alliance system is the fact that it survives nearly fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, in large measure because most East Asians see it as the foundation of their security and prosperity and have yet to devise an alternative.

Implications for the United States

If one assesses the mixed legacies of the premodern, colonial, and Cold War eras, the bottom line of the balance sheet supports the prognosis of continued progress in regional integration and the building of an East Asian identity, albeit with significant qualifications. The centrifugal tendencies—cultural differences, historic rivalries and animosities, and divergent national experiences—are outweighed by the centripetal ones such as historical patterns of cooperation, the common challenge of the West, and the century-long pan-Asianist quest for an Asian identity. But East Asia's past is not necessarily its future. In particular, one cannot assume that the region will automatically reintegrate itself around a strong China, no matter how good neighborly its behavior or professed intentions. China, like Japan, carries its own burden of history in dealing with its neighbors, few of whom seem disposed to place large bets on its putative conversion to multilateralism. Wariness toward China does not, of course, preclude regional cooperation. Indeed, the desire to constrain a rising China by enmeshing it in a web of cooperative undertakings has been and probably will continue to be an important driver of East Asian regionalism.²⁹

Sino-Japanese rivalry—although muted and partially offset by close bilateral economic ties—raises the question of how far and fast cooperation can proceed in a region where the two principal powers are potentially at loggerheads. The experience of Western Europe is not encouraging in this regard. Absent the Franco-German reconciliation of the late 1940s, it is difficult to imagine how European integration could have made much headway. There is little in the historical interaction of China and Japan to suggest that the Japanese would be willing to accept subordination to China.³⁰ Nor is it clear that Beijing is prepared to embrace Japan as an equal partner, except in cases where there is a compelling reason to do so as in the Six Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear crisis. Sino-Japanese competition may, however, afford smaller powers the opportunity to draw Beijing and Tokyo into a “bidding war.” Many observers, for example, see the prospective China-ASEAN FTA as providing leverage to coax Japan into similar initiatives toward ASEAN.³¹

Another factor that may slow down East Asian regionalism is the reluctance of Southeast Asians to fold themselves into a larger East Asia where they might be overshadowed by China and Japan. Having forged a regional identity of their own, which is based largely on their common interest in resisting Great Power dictation, Southeast Asians can hardly welcome the prospect of a closed East Asia in which they would be at the mercy of their giant northern neighbors. Working through ASEAN, they have so far forestalled this possibility by maintaining a united front, balancing China against Japan, controlling the agenda of regional cooperation, and—perhaps most important—keeping the United States and other extra-regional powers in play as balancers and hedges. However, ASEAN's continued unity and cohesion cannot be taken for granted in light of the weakening of Indonesia, its *primus inter pares*; the divisions exposed by the financial crisis; and the dilution of its homogeneity as a result of its admission of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.³²

A third impediment to East Asian regionalism is the lack of popular support. Regionalism is overwhelmingly an elite phenomenon—a matter of interest to officials, academics, and journalists acting in a

context of “massive indifference” by broader publics. So, too, is Asianism. Recent poll data indicate, for example, that only about a quarter of Japanese consider themselves to be Asians. A slightly higher percentage of Chinese (thirty percent) identify themselves in this way. (Eighty percent of South Koreans, on the other hand, consider themselves Asians.)³³ Public indifference to the idea of East Asia does not constitute an insuperable obstacle to regionalization, regionalism, or an East Asian consciousness. It does, however, suggest that the constituencies promoting these trends are narrowly based and vulnerable to pressures from those with wider nationalist identifications and loyalties, including the desire to protect fragile national sovereignties.

What does this mean for the United States? American interests in East Asian regionalism are threefold: that it be open and nonexclusionary; not undermine U.S. alliances and cooperative relationships; and contribute to regional economic growth and political stability. East Asian regionalism at present threatens none of these interests; indeed, it supports them.³⁴ It is true that the launching of APT reflected dissatisfaction with the U.S. response to the financial crisis and a desire for greater regional autonomy. But few participants in APT view it as a vehicle for creating an exclusionary bloc. Japan’s Prime Minister Koizumi, in particular, has strongly reaffirmed Tokyo’s long-standing position that East Asian regionalism must be open and pan-Pacific in orientation. Most East Asians seem to agree. Thus, ASEAN’s FTA with China has been accompanied by moves by ASEAN member states to negotiate bilateral FTAs with the United States and other extra-regional partners.

Looking forward, it is reasonable to expect that East Asian regionalism will continue to include the United States. Although other scenarios are possible,³⁵ American participation seems to be a necessary condition of the future progress of East Asian regionalism, since East Asians cannot dispense with the United States as an economic partner and the ultimate guarantor of regional security. A U.S. withdrawal, real or imagined, would likely lead to the unraveling of APT and the intensification of Sino-Japanese and other rivalries. Even with American involvement, however, East Asia’s movement toward an ASEAN-style grouping or anything resembling the European community will be incremental at best. East Asia is not Southeast Asia, much less Western Europe: It is too diverse, its power differentials too great, and its national conflicts too deep-seated to make the ASEAN or EU models easily transferable. Therefore, the most likely prospect in the short- to mid-term is that East Asia will continue to integrate economically without coalescing politically.

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